

National Celebrate Pro Bono Week should be cheered

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It's National Celebrate Pro Bono Week — today through Saturday — so for lawyers, judges, business people and pro bono clients reading this, what are you going to do to celebrate?

According to the American Bar Association, the event's sponsor, the celebration "is a coordinated national effort to meet the ever-growing needs of this country's most vulnerable citizens by encouraging and supporting local efforts to expand the delivery of pro bono legal services and by showcasing the great difference that pro bono lawyers make to the nation, its system of justice, its communities and, most of all, to the clients they serve."

State and federal judges in the Tampa Bay area can celebrate by attending the Judicial Pro Bono Summit tomorrow at the Chester H. Ferguson Law Center. Sponsored by the 13th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee, the summit will teach judges how to recruit and recognize attorneys for pro bono service; how to promote pro bono service; how to accommodate pro bono practice; how to collaborate with legal services providers; and how to participate in pro bono initiatives.

Lawyers can celebrate by adhering to the Florida Supreme Court's theme of "One client. One attorney. One promise." They can do this by taking just one case from a local legal services provider such as Bay Area Legal Services (all types of cases), Crossroads for Florida Kids (unrepresented foster children in dependency and delinquency cases), R U Safe? (domestic violence), the Clemency Project (review a nonviolent offender's record for eligibility for a shortened sentence), or Aging Solutions, the Office of the Public Guardian. Or they might volunteer one or more Tuesday nights (6-7:30) at Project H.E.L.P.: Homeless Experience Legal Protection, operating from offices at Metropolitan Ministries.

Or they might avail themselves of free training in handling family law cases. The training is offered by Bay Area Legal Services to help ease the burgeoning number of cases in which both parties are unrepresented. (One family law division judge recently shared a startling statistic that in more than 50 percent of his cases both parties are unrepresented!)

Law firms can celebrate by reviewing the Florida Bar Business Law Section's Best Practices Guide for a Firm Pro Bono Policy, located at www.flabizlaw.org/files/bestpractices0813.pdf. The BLS's Pro Bono Committee developed this guide to encourage law firms to adopt a formal pro bono policy or, if a firm already has a policy, to provide suggestions for improvements. An example of a "best practice" is that many firms give billable hour goal credit to their lawyers for pro bono work up to a specified maximum even though the work will not be fee-generating.

If you are a business person reading this, please celebrate by adding something to your checklist of criteria for hiring a law firm: a demonstrated commitment to pro bono service. After all, it is in your financial interest to make sure the

justice system works efficiently so that your own case will not be delayed due to the extra time it takes for judges and court staff to handle and process cases of unrepresented parties.

And if you happen to be a client who received pro bono legal assistance at any time in your life, celebrate by thanking (or re-thanking) the lawyer for providing you his or her service for free. That simple act might prompt the lawyer to take on one more pro bono case for another vulnerable party.

Catherine Peek McEwen is a U.S. Bankruptcy Court judge for the Middle District of Florida based in Tampa. She is the immediate past chair of the 13th Judicial Circuit Pro Bono Committee. Her court ranks no. 1 in the nation among all 90 bankruptcy courts for the number of pro se (unrepresented) filings per judge.